

'THE BIZARRE SECRETS OF A LOST EMPIRE'

By Daniel Wolf

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[This article, though not involving Julian directly, is included because of its historic relevance to the anti-nuclear campaign.]

November, 1974. In sub-zero temperatures, Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet general secretary, waved to Gerald Ford as the US president entered Airforce One to return to Washington DC. The two leaders had just completed a summit meeting about strategic nuclear arms limitation, and Brezhnev was pleased with the results. He was even more pleased with the present Ford had brought him a voluminous wolf-fur coat. Brezhnev loved clothes, and liked to show them off to other people.

He and the Soviet Union were at the pinnacle of their power: they had strategic nuclear parity with the United States and were supporting a wave of successful national liberation struggles in the Third World. But on that bitter winter evening Brezhnev was falling apart, as the state he ran was beginning to do.

The Soviet leader meant to take a train straightaway from the airfield back to Vladivostok. But the train did not depart until the next morning. The Soviet public were told that Brezhnev had had a heart attack; to this day, many of his aides believe it was a stroke. But Brezhnev's personal doctor between 1975 and 1982 maintains that he had taken a drug overdose. "By this time, Brezhnev was effectively an addict," he says. Nearly two decades later I tracked down Dr Mikhail Kosarev while doing research for a television documentary series on the Soviet side of the Cold War 'Messengers from Moscow'.

The Soviet state no longer existed, but the doctor was still nervous about telling his story. It was only towards the end of the interview that he plucked up courage:

"So let me make it clear: Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev was taking sedatives and tranquillisers, but in such huge quantities that he was effectively a drug addict. We always called them 'sedatives' to avoid stating the facts, and he would too, to fool himself, but it wasn't the truth."

The truth is that, for the last seven years of his life, Brezhnev was a mental cripple. His doctors needed four to six weeks to prepare him for public meetings, and even then things would go wrong: film of Brezhnev's public speeches in the late 1970s shows a decrepit amnesiac who could hardly mouth even the robotic language of Soviet-speak.

Some people close to Brezhnev found it convenient to keep him in this state: the country was run by a "troika" KGB chief Yuri Andropov, defence minister Dimitri Ustinov and, looming over them, the "grey cardinal", Mikhail Suslov, sour and pedantic guardian of the ideology, the sacred texts that justified their every action. Between them, these men had power without responsibility: if things went wrong, they could always blame Brezhnev.

The story of Brezhnev's addiction is not just a bizarre tale of the truth behind the facade: it is a perfect cameo of the Soviet system. It was a world of absolute secrecy and ultimate absurdity.

The passion for secrecy was an essential component of the system, a logical consequence of its origins as a conspiratorial regime built up by a small group of fanatics. Information was distributed purely on a "need to know" basis. But it is wrong to believe that, behind the wall of secrecy, the system was out of control. With Brezhnev or without him, the system was only too well controlled. The military-industrial complex

would have been no less powerful if Brezhnev had been fit and well, for he had been building it up since the mid-1960s.

It was, in fact, during the period when Brezhnev was increasingly losing his grip that the Soviet Union moved into a new phase of confrontation with the West. This was not the "troika" taking advantage of their leader's weakness but because a new opportunity had risen.

As Georgi Arbatov, a central committee member for 20 years, put it:

"All these people from the old bureaucracy, with many traits of Stalinism in their way of thinking they understood that the Americans had become weak: they had to retreat from Vietnam, they were beaten there, humiliated. It's now our turn."

What followed was intensified conflict throughout the Third World, culminating in the invasion of Afghanistan, and the "missile crisis" in Europe.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Brezhnev-era offensive was the Soviet attempt to win the battle of ideas by fostering the western peace movement of the late 1970s. The Russians tried very hard to stoke up the peace movement, and their paw marks can be found all over some of the main events, particularly the neutron bomb and cruise missile campaigns. Their operations have been known about in the intelligence and foreign affairs community for some years, but this is the first time that senior Soviet figures of the time have admitted it on camera.

The story starts in the mid-1970s, soon after the Ford-Brezhnev meeting. Andrei Grachev, former head of long-term planning, international propaganda, told us:

"There was not only the intention but the belief that it would be possible to exploit the anti-war feelings of the western public after Vietnam and to make them serve Soviet state policy."

Soviet central committee documents confirm that by 1976 the leadership was committed to fostering the peace movement. Its chance was just around the corner. In the mid-1970s KGB intelligence learned that America was developing the neutron bomb, a weapon with lower blast and higher radiation emissions than conventional nuclear weapons.

According to General Nikolai Leonov, KGB head of analysis, the Russians knew in advance about the neutron bomb. This allowed them to launch an extensive and co-ordinated propaganda campaign the very moment that President Jimmy Carter announced, in July 1977, the weapon's development and possible deployment in Europe.

There were shoals of Moscow radio propaganda broadcasts; 28 communist parties published statements denouncing the "barbarous nature" of the weapon; an "International Week of Action" was called by the Soviet-controlled World Peace Council for August 1977. Hundreds of meetings, demonstrations and protests were organised across the world.

In Britain, when we examined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) archives, we confirmed that peace campaigning was a big part of communist activities. Communists were certainly active in CND: the chairman of CND at that time, John Cox, was a well-known party member and former member of the executive committee of the CPGB (1971-73). In the mid-1970s, two of CND's three full-time workers were Communist party members. In Holland epicentre of the Soviet campaign communists were prominent and successful.

But did any of this activity have an effect? When you examine the chronology, interview the leading Soviet players and see the previously secret documents, the anti-neutron bomb campaign doesn't look so much a response to Carter's announcement as to the Soviet propaganda campaign. It is arguable that the movement would have started up in any event, but given its appearance after a concerted Soviet effort, it seems a trifle disingenuous for commentators and apologists to deny that the Soviet campaign played any significant role.

The anti-neutron-bomb campaign was the breakthrough for the Russians, and the peace movement took off. In the end, it was a close-run thing. A few years later, hundreds of thousands came out on the streets to protest at the siting of missiles, and western governments only just held their nerve. One of the leading figures in the Soviet peace campaign, Tair Tairov, believes it was a good thing that they did.

"If they hadn't, that would have given the Soviet leadership a false argument, or a distorted vision of their power, which they would have misused. Moscow would have celebrated, started dictating to Western Europe, and that perhaps could have brought on a real tragedy..."

To understand these East-West confrontations, you have to start with the ideological claim of the party. The Soviet Union was not just a state but a mission: it existed to lead the working class to communism all over the world. By that mission, party leaders from Lenin through Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev justified their power over all aspects of Soviet life. Without the mission, what would the party leaders be but just another bunch of criminal dictators battenning on a ravaged, bleeding nation? With it, they were messengers of an "inevitable" future.

In the words of Mikhail Kapitsa, former deputy foreign minister of the Soviet Union:

"This ideology cost us billions and billions. Billions for nothing. Billions for just ideas."

The best proof that the Soviet Union was the ideology came with its collapse. In the summer of 1988, Eduard Shevardnadze, then foreign minister, announced the abandonment of the central ideological principle, "the class struggle in international relations". The trouble was that without the ideology, the whole gigantic, ruinous structure made no sense. Within a year the Berlin Wall had fallen. Within three, the Soviet Union was no more.